STATEMENT OF SHERRI FIELDS, CHIEF, NATURAL RESOURCES DIVISION, SOUTHEAST REGION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U. S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE, DRUG POLICY AND HUMAN RESOURCES, OF THE HOUSE GOVERNMENT REFORM COMMITTEE, AT AN OVERSIGHT HEARING CONCERNING THE NATIONAL PARKS OF FLORIDA.

JANUARY 11, 2006

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss key issues facing national parks in Florida, with particular focus on the costs of restoring natural landscapes. We are pleased to welcome you to Miami.

First, on behalf of the National Park Service (NPS), I would like to acknowledge and thank Congress for its continuing support of our parks and programs in the Southeast Region, particularly the NPS areas of Florida, as well as the entire National Park System. With me today are Karen Gustin, Superintendent of Big Cypress National Preserve, Dan Kimball, Superintendent of Everglades National Park, and Mark Lewis, Superintendent of Biscayne National Park. They will be happy to answer any specific questions about their parks.

The State of Florida is home to 11 units of the National Park System, including Fort Caroline and De Soto National Memorials, Canaveral and Gulf Islands National Seashores, Castillo de San Marcos and Fort Matanzas National Monuments, and the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve.

Here in South Florida we manage the three largest and arguably most ecologically significant NPS areas in the State: Everglades National Park, the largest remaining subtropical wilderness in the United States; Biscayne National Park, the largest marine park in the National Park System; and Big Cypress National Preserve, the first national preserve in the National Park System.

Approximately 70 miles west of Key West, Florida, is Dry Tortugas National Park, a cluster of seven islands, which is composed of coral reefs, sand, and surrounding shoals and waters, and which includes Fort Jefferson, one of the largest coastal forts built.

In 2004, NPS units in Florida welcomed more than nine million visitors who generated millions of dollars in economic benefits to surrounding communities. The NPS respects the responsibilities entrusted to us by the American people, and our focus remains fixed on protecting these places for the enjoyment of present and future generations.

Congress appropriated more than $31.5 million for the operation of the National Parks of Florida in Fiscal Year (FY) 2005, an increase of about 6 percent from FY 2004. In addition to park base funding, other funding sources included $668,700 for cyclic maintenance projects and $887,344 for repair/rehabilitation projects.

As is the case throughout the National Park System, parks in Florida are funded from several different sources, in addition to their operating budgets, to help carry out their mission. Many receive cyclic maintenance funds distributed by the regional office, and some have construction and land acquisition funds designated for individual parks in annual appropriations bills. Parks also collect concessions fees, transportation fees, and recreation fees. For FY 2005, Florida parks received about $3,367,000 from the 80 percent portion of recreation fees that individual parks retain, which will be used for projects that benefit visitors. In addition, Florida parks have been given a great deal of financial and in-kind support from cooperating associations, friends' groups, and other partnership entities.

Everglades Restoration

The Everglades National Park Protection and Expansion Act of 1989 authorized the addition of 109,600 acres of the Northeast Shark River Slough to the Park. The Act directed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) to improve water deliveries to Everglades National Park and, to the extent practicable, take steps to restore the natural hydrologic conditions and the biological abundance and diversity of the Park. Through fiscal year 2005, the project received $191 million in NPS construction funds and $100 million from the Land and Water Conservation Fund for the purpose of acquiring the East Everglades Addition to Everglades National Park and to implement the Modified Water Deliveries Project. All but 500 acres have been acquired and several components of the Modified Water Deliveries Project have been completed. For fiscal year 2006, the Congress appropriated an additional $60 million to the NPS and the Corps to carry out the Modified Water Deliveries Project, which has an estimated completion date of 2009 subject to the selection of a final design plan for the Tamiami Trail component of the project.

In 2000, Congress passed the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), a State and federal partnership that is estimated to cost $15 billion and take several decades to complete. The 68 project components comprising CERP are intended to provide benefits for the natural ecosystem while also providing for urban and agricultural uses. To date, the State and federal governments have established the legal assurances in the form of a binding and enforceable agreement, as well as programmatic regulations, to ensure that appropriate quantities of water that are produced by CERP are set aside by the State of Florida and dedicated and managed for the restoration of the Everglades natural system. Additionally, the agencies have established an independent scientific panel, chaired by the National Academy of Sciences, to report biennially to the Congress on the restoration success of CERP. The agencies have also proposed interim goals by which to measure restoration success and have developed technical guidance to implement CERP.

Also, the Corps and the South Florida Water Management District have initiated more detailed project planning on a number of plan components, including several near Everglades and Biscayne National Parks, and the State of Florida is providing up-front funding in the form of its *Acceler8* initiative for several of the largest water storage components. That initiative is a major boost for Everglades restoration which reaffirms the commitment of the Federal, State, and local partnership to revitalize the ecosystem. The Everglades National Park South Florida Natural Resources Center is coordinating NPS involvement in this interagency effort. Utilizing additions to the park's base in FY 2001 and 2002, new science staff has been hired to support enhanced

NPS participation in these new restoration responsibilities. More specifically, NPS science staff is participating in interagency teams to develop, model, and evaluate alternatives and to recommend environmentally preferred plans.

Last year, the State of Florida announced its initiative to accelerate elements of the CERP and commit the funding necessary to plan, design, and construct these projects. This evidence of the State's commitment of more than $1.5 billion provides the opportunity to "jump start" the Restoration Plan agenda.

If all the restoration projects are implemented, Everglades National Park and other protected natural areas in South Florida could be transformed from some of the most threatened units in the National Park System to restored and unique areas of a healthy South Florida. For example, at Biscayne National Park, the promise of increased quantity, timing, and quality of fresh water being restored to Biscayne Bay provides hope for the restoration of the diversity and abundance of this wonderful underwater ecosystem and this critically important fishery.

Other Landscape Restoration Efforts

Non-native exotic plants are the single greatest natural resource threat to the native plant communities of Everglades National Park. There are approximately 1,000 plant species recorded in the park. Of these, more than 200 species are exotic. Overall, these species are estimated to affect approximately 200,000-250,000 acres of the park.

In order to address the threat posed by exotics, Everglades National Park's Exotic Vegetation Management Program requested and received funds from several State and federal sources for the treatment of invasive exotic plants. In FY 2005, more than 110,000 acres of affected parklands in Everglades National Park were treated and controlled.

A special landscape restoration project has been ongoing since 1989 in the Hole-in-the-Donut area of Everglades National Park. This area, originally a wetland, was farmed from 1918 until 1975. When farming ceased, the area became dominated by the non-native tree commonly known as Brazilian pepper. County wetland mitigation bank funds are being used to restore the area to a marl prairie wetland vegetative community with its associated wildlife. Total estimated project costs are more than $100 million. All costs have been obtained from non-NPS appropriated funds through cooperative agreement with Miami-Dade County. To date, 4,047 acres have been treated; about 65% of the total of 6,250 acres. Environmental monitoring activities, also supported through cooperative funds, are documenting recovery stages and success rates, as well as wildlife re-uses of the area.

Research Natural Area

In July 2001, the NPS approved a General Management Plan Amendment for Dry Tortugas National Park. The amendment established a 46-square-mile Research Natural Area that will be open only to non-consumptive uses. The prohibition of all fishing in the Research Natural Area, for fish stock replenishment purposes, complements the already existing Tortugas Ecological Reserve, a part of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. The park has begun the early

stages of developing an implementation plan to include placing boundary and mooring buoys, scoping the terms for concession contracted services, creating a new fee system, and other required rule-making procedures. Also, a management agreement has been executed between the State of Florida and the Secretary of the Interior to ensure that the submerged lands within Dry Tortugas National Park will be managed in accordance with the laws, regulations, and policies applicable to the NPS.

Impacts of Illegal Immigrants

Encounters with illegal immigrants seeking to land without authorization on U.S. territory have posed challenges for the NPS since the early 1960's. NPS supply vessels traveling to and from the Dry Tortugas National Park have encountered and have had to detain boats carrying illegal immigrants. Illegal immigrants also are landing and hiding on keys within Dry Tortugas National Park, with over 600 people arriving between January and June during 2005. Some of these areas are ecologically sensitive areas that are permanently or periodically closed or limited to the public for resource management purposes, such as turtle or bird nesting. For example, Loggerhead Key, the largest key in the park, has an established carrying capacity of 24 visitors per day to ensure restoration of native vegetation. The activities of illegal immigrants in these ecologically sensitive areas make enforcement of these closures and limitations and, ultimately, the protection of the resources more difficult to achieve.

Off-Road-Vehicle (ORV) Plan

Restoration of landscape resources within Big Cypress National Preserve will be implemented and heavily dependent on completion of the Big Cypress Off-Road-Vehicle (ORV) Plan. The ORV Plan, adopted in 2001, provides protection for critical habitat through the establishment of a network of designated ORV trails. At an estimated cost of approximately $19 million, the plan establishes 400 miles of stabilized trails that will protect fragile wetland vegetation communities and lessen disturbances to area wildlife while providing recreation and access to backcountry destinations for visitors and private property in-holders.

Ongoing restoration projects include sites such as Patton's Pit, a former salvage yard and service station that will be converted to wetlands for the benefit of fish, wildlife, and aquatic vegetation. Site remediation plans included the removal of potentially hazardous materials such as old fuel tanks, unmarked containers of unknown substances, and various automobile parts. A borrow pit found at the site will be partially backfilled with on-site fill material that was excavated from the pit. Abandoned oil pads and access roads that predate the establishment of the preserve are being considered as potential mitigation sites in an effort to restore the natural hydrologic character and function of wetlands in the vicinity of these sites.

Coral Reef Restoration

Underwater landscape damage in Biscayne National Park is often the direct result of more than 200 annual vessel groundings in Biscayne National Park, most of which occur on fragile sea grass beds. Fortunately, few groundings occur on the even more fragile coral reefs. The park

has restored a number of heavily damaged sea grass meadows, and this has significantly contributed to the improvement of sea grass restoration technology.

Although many different technologies for coral reef restoration have been tried, success has been meager and difficult to quantify. The inability to satisfactorily restore damaged coral reefs is due in large part to limited understanding of coral reef ecology. The park will continue to pursue restoration of damaged reef tracts and has developed coral reef nurseries to assist in those efforts.

Hurricanes Dennis, Rita, Katrina & Wilma

Mr. Chairman, by now the devastation caused by the two most destructive hurricane seasons in recent memory has been imprinted in the minds of millions of Americans. The National Parks of Florida were also severely impacted by those storms. In addition to damage to landscapes and seascapes, facilities at Everglades, Big Cypress, Dry Tortugas, Biscayne, and Gulf Islands were also damaged.

Everglades and Dry Tortugas National Parks were hit hard by Category 3 Hurricane Wilma, which passed over the area on October 24, 2005, causing high winds and storm surge. At the time, both parks were also still in the process of recovering from significant damage from Hurricane Katrina, which had passed through in late August.

The Dry Tortugas received damage that was similar in nature and scale to that experienced during Hurricane Charley in 2004, including damage to the finger piers, the moat wall, and upper brick work at the fort. Many trees were downed, and damage to some staff quarters was sustained. Shifting sands have changed the configuration of some of the islands and channels adjacent to Garden Key.

Everglades damage was most severe in the Flamingo area. This area experienced very high winds and an eight-foot storm surge which deposited eight to ten inches of mud over much of the in-shore area. Facilities, staff residences, and utilities were damaged or destroyed. The lodge and cabins at Flamingo sustained significant damage and are not in a habitable condition. Efforts are underway to reopen portions of Flamingo for day use visitor services and to allow front and backcountry camping this season.

At Biscayne National Park, natural resources were heavily impacted beginning with Hurricane Dennis in August and culminating with Hurricane Wilma in late October. On the islands, the slow recovery from the vegetative damage of Hurricane Andrew was significantly reversed by the repeated hurricanes. Although trails have now been reopened, salt spray from the storms has killed much of the leafy cover, slowing recovery.

Amidst this rash of hurricanes, elevated water temperatures in August triggered a significant coral bleaching event, which continued through November. All of the branching corals, the primary reef builders, were heavily damaged by the hurricane, and their mortality was increased by the trauma of the bleaching event. The hurricanes pushed many lobster traps onto the reef increasing the level of storm damage by abrasion, smothering and filling voids used by fish, lobsters, and other invertebrates. Plans are being developed to remove the debris, but our limited

understanding of the underwater environment forces us to rely on natural processes for the vast majority of recovery processes within the reef tracts.

At Big Cypress National Preserve, the 2005 hurricane season will be recorded as the most destructive season since Hurricane Andrew in 1992, affecting the ecology, wildlife, cultural, and economic well-being of the region. Following an unusually active rainy season, hurricane winds and elevated water levels resulting from Hurricanes Rita and Wilma exacerbated existing problems created from near-record high-water levels. The cumulative effect of rain and high winds proved to be damaging to endangered species, plant communities, cultural resources, and recreational conditions within the preserve. Immediate attention was devoted to a condition assessment following Hurricane Wilma, and a full assessment and remediation program for natural resource damages will be required, including a comprehensive assessment of invasive exotic plant and animal species, damage to threatened and endangered species such as the red-cockaded woodpecker, damage to cultural sites, and damage to important hardwood hammocks.

Big Cypress National Preserve has identified several landscape restoration projects that can be initiated prior to the completion of the full condition assessment. Specific projects include: (1) treatment of exotics along the Loop Road following mowing and removal of brush, an activity that can spread or worsen infestations; (2) treatment and removal of Brazilian pepper from hammocks and pine flatwoods throughout the preserve; (3) an assessment of the types of changes to vegetative communities that have occurred as a result of Hurricane Wilma, which would cover mapping software and hardware as well as aerial and ground surveys; (4) an impact assessment and follow-up monitoring of rare plant species in upland communities with mitigation measures if necessary; and (5) a survey of the northern portion of the preserve to determine the extent of the spread of Old World Climbing Fern, due to wind generated spore dispersal.

In conclusion, we are deeply committed to protecting the places in our care and ensuring quality visitor experiences for present and future generations. We deeply appreciate the support parks have received from Congress and from the American people. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I would be happy to respond to any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.